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January 10, 2002

Steven Brand
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Dear Steve:

It was good meeting with you in New York and having the opportunity to discuss at length your film on the late Abraham Joshua Heschel of blessed memory. As you know, Heschel was one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the mid-twentieth century. Like Martin Buber, he mastered almost all aspects of Jewish tradition. His work on the Prophets, originally his Ph.D. thesis - he was the last student of Jewish Studies to receive his Ph.D. in German Universities during the Nazi regime - displays his mastery of Biblical Israel and his understanding of the inner life of the great Prophets of Israel. His work on Rabbinic Judaism was insightful and original. He also was fluent in Medieval Jewish literature, philosophical, mystical and legal. There too, he understood both the philosophical writings of the great Jewish thinkers but also the spiritual and historical reality that impacted their thought. The Scion of one of the truly distinguished Hasidic dynasties, Heschel understood Hasidism both internally and externally. And he contributed substantially to modern Jewish thought.

I am tempted to say more importantly, but that would be unfair to Heschel's scholarship so permit me to write in addition, Heschel was the most visible Jewish social activist of his generation. He participated in the great struggles of his time from the Civil Rights Movement to the anti-war movement, from the struggle for Soviet Jewry to the defense of the fledgling state of Israel. He was Reinhold Niebuhr's closest friend and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s spiritual soul mate. He also negotiated on behalf of the Jewish people with Pope Paul VI on the language and substance of *Nostra Aetatae*, perhaps the most important document of Jewish-Roman Catholic relations in the last millennium. When he entered the portals of the Vatican he was the spiritual equal of all those he encountered, equal to them in scholarship, learning and mastery, and the proud representative of the mother religion of Christianity. It is a sad commentary on contemporary Jewish life that leadership on this issue has now been turned over to bureaucrats and apparatchiks rather than spiritual giants.

Heschel wrote in seven languages. Yiddish was his native language; Polish was the language of his native land; Hebrew was his Holy Tongue; German the language in which he first encountered secular subject. His Italian was magnificent, his French impressive and his writings in English, a language he learned in adulthood, was poetic, majestic.

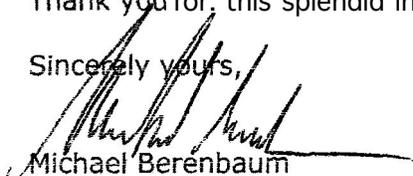
His relationship with the Jewish Theological Seminary was tense and often difficult. The Reform Hebrew Union College saved his life by offering him a teaching position in the United States just on the eve of the war. A traditional, observant Jew of Hasidic origin, he spent the war years in Cincinnati teaching in an institution that was preaching the religion of rationality as the world that he knew was literally destroyed and the people he knew were sent up in smoke. When he left for the Jewish Theological Seminary at the

end of the war he gathered his disciples around him and said: "Gentlemen, even professors can graduate." At the Seminary, he was a mystic who asked the question of spiritual meaning among scholars who were the proud heirs of Wissenschaft Des Judentums and therefore asked only the question of the historical meaning of the text. And he was the mystic who stood worlds apart from his colleague Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, who had built a naturalist Jewish theology influenced by John Dewey and other distinguished American thinkers. He was often indifferent in the classroom - yet those privileged to enter his study experienced genuine learning and were in the presence of a master. In death, his presence loomed larger around the Seminary as both faculty and students - current and former - became aware of what they lost.

I could go on and on. Suffice it to say that I believe that your project is worthy and I would be honored to participate. You have a copy of my c.v., which includes not only my scholarly work but also my work in film. I have taught several seminars on Heschel's work and am familiar both with him as a person and with the entire corpus of his work.

Thank you for this splendid invitation. I look forward to interesting work together.

Sincerely yours,



Michael Berenbaum